DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 098 CE 041 428

AUTHOR Rice, Gail
TITLE What ABE Teachers Can Do to Help Beginning-Level Readers. NAAESC Occasional Papers, Volume 1, Number 1.
INSTITUTION Northern Illinois Univ., DeKalb. Northern Area Adult Education Service Center.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Beginning Reading; Instructional Material Evaluation; *Language Experience Approach; Material Development; *Media Selection; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; *Teacher Developed Materials; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The adult basic education teacher of undereducated adults must know how to use techniques and materials that ensure success at the most basic levels. The language experience approach is one of the most effective techniques to use with these learners. Of the four language experience methods, the dictation and transcription methods are best suited for nonreader or beginning-level readers. The language experience approach is effective because it focuses on reading as a communication process and provides the learner with a good model of reading. Besides their own words, adult learners are motivated to read the materials they encounter in everyday coping tasks. Teachers need to assist the learner to "read" the material that would ordinarily be too difficult. To meet the need for interesting, easy-to-read materials for more independent readers, teachers can write or rewrite materials. Teachers can use the same principles of readable writings to guide them as they evaluate and select commercial materials. Teachers must help learners develop literal, inferential, and critical comprehension skills, especially by designing appropriate questions to accompany reading materials. Learners must also develop vocabulary skills because of their close relationship with comprehension skills. (YLB)

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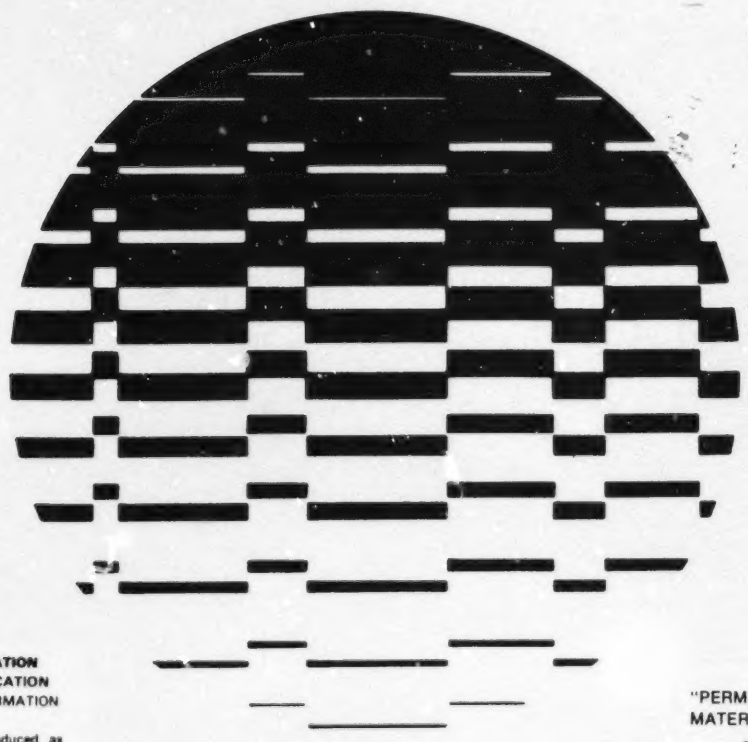

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by Gail Rice

Volume 1, Number 1 May, 1983

DeKalb Office
Gabel Hall 200
DeKalb, Illinois 60115
815-753-1441

Chicago Office
3901 So. State Street
Chicago, Illinois 60609
312-924-0743

Arlington Heights Office (ESL)
500 So. Dwyer Ave.
Arlington Heights, Illinois 60005
312-870-4130

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Nonreaders and beginning-level readers are often the learners that present the greatest difficulty and challenge to the ABE teacher. Not only do they require much more help and instruction than other learners in order to develop the reading and writing skills necessary to function in daily tasks, but because they have experienced so much failure and frustration in the past, they are likely to have worse self-concepts and more negative feelings about the reading process (Jones, 1981, pp. 25-52). It is not enough for the ABE teacher to know principles of working with undereducated adults (Bowren & Zintz, 1977, pp. 8-66); the teacher must also know how to use techniques and materials that ensure success at the most basic levels. What techniques and materials are best?

The language experience approach is one of the most effective techniques to use with these learners. Of the four language experience methods described by Kennedy and Roeder (1975, pp. 10-19), the dictation and transcription methods are best suited for nonreaders or beginning-level readers. In the dictation method, the learner dictates something to the teacher, who prints it word-for-word as dictated. The teacher reads the story back to the learner while pointing to the words, and the learner repeats. Eventually the learner reads the whole story without help, and may be able to recognize many words pointed to at random. Later the teacher can give the learner a typed copy of the story to read. In the transcription method, the teacher tape-records the words of one or more learners, transcribes them, and gives the transcribed copy to the learner(s). The learner(s) can read this

copy while replaying the tape. With either method, a teacher can use words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs from the language experience story to develop many skills in sight word identification, phonetic and structural analysis, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, spelling, and English.

The language experience approach is effective for several reasons (Kennedy & Roeder, 1975, pp. 4-9). It focuses on reading as a communication process, linking oral language with written symbols, and it provides the learner with a good model of reading. Reading material--the learner's own words--is usually much more relevant and motivating than are typical commercial materials. The learner's self-esteem increases as the learner realizes that his or her own words are worthy of being shared, written down, and preserved. And the teacher can adapt this technique for the abilities of each learner so that success is virtually guaranteed.

What else are adult learners really motivated to read, besides their own words? Many of them want to read the real-life materials they encounter in their everyday coping tasks--materials like ads, contracts, labels, signs, recipes, menus, catalogs, bills, and newspapers. These resources are often free and readily available. And, like the language experience stories, they can be used to teach everything from recognizing words and letters to comprehension skills (Rice, 1981, pp. 38-40).

But what if these or other materials that interest the learner are too difficult for him or her to read? (This is a common problem teachers face when working with beginning-level

readers.) A teacher can get around this difficulty by assisting the learner with the reading. Here are some suggestions to help enable the learner to "read" material that would ordinarily be too difficult:

1. As with the language experience approach, the teacher can read the material first and have the learner repeat, perhaps going over the material several times.
2. The teacher can prepare a cassette tape, and the learner can read along with it, first silently and then orally. With a tape, a learner can even work independently.
3. If the learner can already read much of the material aloud, the teacher can simply supply those words the learner doesn't know.

As skills develop so that the learner begins to read more independently, he or she will want to have many interesting, easy-to-read materials available. To help meet this need, teachers can try writing (or <u>rewriting</u>) materials on lower reading levels (Rice, 1981, pp. 12-20). For this task they may want to learn how to use a readability formula to get an approximate measure of some factors of reading difficulty (Laubach and Koschnick, 1977).

How can teachers write or rewrite materials so that they are easy to read? They must remember that the most readable writing is that which interests the learner, that relates to him or her, that focuses on <u>people</u> rather than on <u>things</u>. Whenever they can, teachers should <u>write the way they talk</u>, avoiding impersonal and formal language. They must explain vocabulary and concepts clearly, replacing difficult, abstract words with shorter, more

familiar, concrete words that learners can experience. Teachers should prefer the active voice to the passive, replacing nouns with vivid verbs wherever possible. Without sacrificing variety, teachers can construct shorter, less complex sentences and paragraphs. Finally, they need to make the material look attractive and easy to read.

Teachers can use these same principles of readable writing to guide them as they evaluate and select commercial materials, too. ABE learners want materials with people and situations they can identify with, materials in which people like themselves are portrayed with dignity. Teachers should expecially avoid using commercial materials that damage a learner's self-esteem with offensive features such as patronizing or condescending language, jargon, middle-class or other biases, stereotypes, misrepresentations, moralizing, or examples that criticize ABE learners or others like them (Rice, 1981, pp. 10-11).

Another big challenge for the ABE teacher, after he or she has provided the learner with appropriate reading materials, is to help the learner build comprehension skills. Beginning-level readers can easily get so caught up in learning how to decode words that they forget that the purpose of reading is to comprehend and react to another person's ideas. Unfortunately, most low-reading-level materials do little to develop comprehension skills beyond a literal understanding of the words and sentences.

The teacher must help the learner develop literal comprehension skills (understanding what the author actually says in the selection) and inferential comprehension skills (making

inferences, understanding what the author means by what is said). Such skills include recalling or recognizing facts, identifying the main idea and supporting details, categorizing, outlining, summarizing, following directions, following a sequence, understanding cause and effect, using context clues, interpreting figurative language, drawing conclusions, predicting outcomes, and judging the author's point of view, mood, tone, or purpose. At still another level, the learner uses critical comprehension skills to apply some external criterion from his or her own experience to a selection; the reader passes judgment on the quality, logic, reliability, accuracy, truthfulness, or value of the writing. Examples of critical comprehension skills are comparing and contrasting ideas, evaluating the author's credentials, distinguishing fact from opinion, and identifying biases, propaganda, or faulty reasoning.

The teacher can help build these skills in many ways (Jordan, Knox, & Malone, 1982, pp. 45-59), especially by designing appropriate questions to accompany the learner's reading materials (Rice, 1981, pp. 33-35). For learners with limited reading and writing ability, the teacher can read selections aloud and ask questions orally. Or the teacher can tape a selection and some comprehension questions with multiple-choice answers; the learner can then read along silently with the tape, marking the correct answers as they are read.

The relationship between comprehension skills and vocabulary skills deserves special mention. Comprehension and thoughts are based on ideas and concepts in the learner's mind. Those ideas and concepts are developed and triggered by words. Therefore, it

is crucial for the learner to develop vocabulary skills which help him or her understand and use words and relate them to existing ideas and concepts. There are many ways a teacher can help the learner build these skills. For example, a teacher might use oral discussions, written vocabulary exercises (Rice, 1981, pp. 26-32), and commercial or teacher-made games (Rice, 1981, pp. 43-48).

By carefully choosing techniques and materials, then, the ABE teacher can help even nonreaders and beginning-level readers experience success in reading.

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About the Author

Gail Rice has taught Adult Basic Education for 11 years and is currently on the faculty at Thornton Community College. She is the author of Preparing Your Own Adult Basic Education Materials and a series of texts titled Focus on Phonics.